Iraqi Preparatory School Learners Use of the Conversation

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The study deals with the difficulties which is encountered preparatory schools learners in using conversation. Therefore, the study aims at measuring the students' ability in manipulating conversation. It is hypothesized that: Iraqi preparatory schools learners face difficulty in their conversation. A diagnostic test has been adapted and applied to a sample of (50) Iraqi preparatory schools learners to verify this hypothesis. Analyzing the data, the results expose that errors committed by the subjects certify the hypothesis.

Keywords: Structure of Conversation, Conversation Opening, Context of Learning, Communication Strategies, Testing Speaking.

الخلاصة

تضمنت الدراسة المشاكل التي يواجهها طلبة الدراسة الاعدادية في استعمال المحادثة.
لذا هدفت الدراسة معرفة قابلية الطلبة في استخدام المحادثة. افترضت فرضية بأن طلبة الدراسة الاعدادية يواجهون مشاكل في كيفية المحادثة. لذا اجري اختبار تشخيصي لعينة مكونة من (٥٠) طالب من الدراسة الاعدادية للتحقق من الفرضية، وبعد تحليل النتائج وجد بأن هنالك اخطاء كثيرة تواجه طلبة الدراسة الاعدادية في استعمال المحادثة مما يؤكد فرضية البحث.

الكلمات افتتاحية: تركيب المحادثة، بداية المحادثة، النصوص التعليمية، ستراتيجيات الاتصال، اختبار الكلام

1-Introduction

It is certain that conversation, like any other type of communication, consists of a beginning, middle and an end.

Knowing how to start a conversation is an important task because establishing safe and comfortable conversation, to a great extent, depends on initiating talks nicely. Failure to get along with others using the wrong opening creates misunderstanding. This may happen because of inter-cultural differences of employing various kinds of gambits for example, misunderstanding a form of greeting such as 'how are you?" as an inquiry about health, while, in fact, it is a sort of phatic communion "(Mey:219). Depending on mother tongue linguistic habits, one cannot decide the specific form of conversation adopted by people of different culture when communicating with them. Thus, the study aims at measuring the students' ability in manipulating conversation, identifying the types of errors made s conversation. It is hypothesized that:

1-Iraqi preparatory schools learners face difficulty in their conversation.

2-Iraqi preparatory learners' inaccurate responses may be attributed to misuse of the conversation.

To verify these hypotheses, a diagnostic test has been adopted and applied to a sample of (50) Iraqi preparatory schools learners. They are asked to use the appropriate conversation for a suitable situations. Analyzing the data, the results expose that errors committed by the subjects are attributed to the following sources:

1-Interlingual transfer

2-Communicative strategies.
3-Context of learning.
4-Intra-lingual error.

2.1 Teaching Conversation

According to Richards (1990:76-7) two major approaches characterize 'current teaching' of conversation ;an indirect approach, that involves planning a conversation program around the specific micro skills, strategies and processes that are involved in fluent conversation, direct approach includes that one does not actually teach conversation, rather that student acquire conversational competence, peripherally, by engaging in meaningful tasks. A direct approach explicitly calls students attention to conversational rules, conversations strategies. Richards (ibid: 79) is somehow critical of task-based instruction, which he labeled as an in tasks the focus is on using Language to complete a task rather than practicing language.

Richards (1990:79-80) suggests the following list of features of conversation that can receive specific focus in classroom interaction:

1- How to use a conversation for both transactional and interactional purposes.
2- How to produce short and long turns in conversation.
3- Strategies for turn-taking in conversation including taking a turn, holding a turn, and relinquishing a turn.
4- Strategies for opening and closing conversations.
5-How to initiate and respond to talks on abroad range of topics, and how to develop and maintain talk on these topics.
6-How to use both a casual style of speaking and a neutral or more formal style.
7- How to use conversation in different social settings and for different kinds of social encounters such as on the telephone.
8- Strategies for repairing trouble spots in conversation, including communication breakdown and comprehension problems.
11- How to use conversational fillers and small talks.
12- How to use conversational routines.

Communicative competence has come to cover a multiplicity of meanings; it is a useful phrase in its principal form.

Bachman (1990:1280) communicative competence is a combination of the following components:

A-Organizational competence (grammatical and discourse).
b- Pragmatic competence (functional and sociolinguistic).
c- Strategic competence
d- Psychomotor skills (pronunciation).

Various writers have tried to specify the components of communicative competence in second languages and their role in performance. This has been done in order to provide a comprehensive framework for test development and testing research, and a basis for the interpretation of test performance.

1-Grammatical or formal competence, which covered the kind of knowledge (of systematic features of grammar, lexis, and phonology) familiar from the discrete point tradition of testing;
2-Sociolinguistic competence, or knowledge of rules of language use in terms of what is appropriate to different types of interlocutors, in different settings, and on different topics;

3-Strategic competence, or the ability to compensate in performance for incomplete or imperfect linguistic resources in a second language; and

4-Discourse competence, or the ability to deal with extended use of language in context (McNamara,2000) .

2.2 The Structure of Conversation

Sinclair et al.(cited in Coulthard, 1985:123)suggests five ranks to deal with the structure of interaction in the classroom: lesson, transaction, exchange, move, and act. For them (ibid), the 'lesson' is just like a paragraph in grammar, while transactions have the structures which are represented by 'exchanges'. For Tehrani and Yeganeh (1999:79), exchange is the basic unit of conversation. Exchanges are bound by 'frames' which are limited to five words "OK, well, right, now, and good" (Coulthard, 1985: 123). However frames are pronounced with strong stress, high falling intonation and with a short pause followed.

Sacks (cited in Coulthard, ibid:69) considers conversation as "a string of at least two turns "which means that it predicts the occurrence of the second part. For example giving a question the speaker expects an answer (ibid). Conversationalists agree that all exchanges are composed of "moves" (See Coulthard, 1985:123 and Tehrani and Yeganeh (1999:79). The first move is called "the opening move" by Sinclair, while Sinclair and Brazil (cited in Tehrani and Yeganeh, ibid) prefer calling it "initiation" e.g.:

A-what do we do with the saw?

B-Cut wood.

A-we cut wood.

reciprocal such as greetings; while in some other first pair parts, only one is appropriate e.g.,question: answer. In other groups, more than one is appropriate e.g., complaints: apology/justification (ibid). A starting turn may consist of one word e.g., "right?", or more than one sentence (Stenstorm, 1984:4).

Built into a lot of caretaker speech is a type of conversational structure which seems to assign an interactive role to the young child even before he or she becomes a speaking participant. If we look at an extract from the speech of one mother to her 2-year-old child as if it were a two-party conversation, then this type of structuring becomes apparent. Mother: there's your cup of tea.

Child: (takes cup)

Mother: you drink it nicely

Child: (pretends to drink)

Mother: oh-is that nice?

Child: (assents)

Mother: will Mummy drink her tea?

Child: (assents)

Mother: I'll drink my tea

Caretaker speech is also characterized by simple sentence structures and a lot of repetition. If the child is indeed in the process of working out a system of putting sounds and words together, then these simplified models produced by the inter acting adult may serve as good clues to the basic structural organization involved. Moreover, it has generally been observed that the speech of those regularly interacting with children changes and becomes more elaborate as the check child begins using more and more language. Several stages in the acquisition process have been identified. (Yule, 1985)

2.3 Vocatives and Attention Getters

Conversation openings are not limited to what is shown previously about greetings or other forms of phatic communion. For "Vocatives" and / or "attention getters" are also starter communication especially face – to – face conversation:

-Hey, Hey, John (ibid).

-Say….

-Excuse me,…(Couthard, 1985:76).

In addition, speakers can use conversational parenthetical such as "You know" , "listen" , Know that"… etc. (Akmajian, et al., 2001: 389). They are called presequenses. Some of them are called inquirers, while others include preannouncement e.g. "What do you know" pre-invitations such as "Are you doing anything tonight ? ",pre-threats such as "Watch it". Such expressions are used to ensure that what is said is within the limits of the possible (i.e. they pave the way to something pave the way to something so that this thing can be achieved).

Leech and Svartvik (1994:172?) add other categories of conversation openings:

2.3.1 Introductions

May I introduce (you to) Miss Brown? (formal) Leech and Svartvik (1994:172).

This is John Smith (ibid).

Meet my wife. (familiar) (ibid).

I don't think you've meet our neighbor, Mr. Quirk (ibid).

2.3.2 Greetings on Introductions

How do you do ? (formal) (ibid)..

Glad to meet you (ibid).

In formal situations, as Ockden(1986:64) explains, a man is introduced to a woman, except when the man is more senior. Young women are introduced to older women and young men to older men e.g. :

- Wendy, I'd like you to meet my brother, Sam.

Or:

Mrs. Hughes, this is peter Brown (ibid).

If the person is of the relatives or of certain nationality, this can be shown in the opening part of conversation:

Mother, this is Joe's brother, David. Or

Mrs. Stacey, like I'd to introduce my Greek friend, Milos.

Yule (1996:77) presents some examples that typically found in the opening phases of conversations (i.e. in the first part):

1-What's up?

2-How's it going?

3-How are things?

4-How you doing? (ibid)

2.4 Testing Listening

Al-Matawan and Kaliani (1989: 162) introduce some listening comprehension tests which take the following forms:

-listen and point. The teacher shows the class various pictures. He, then, describes one of the pictures, asking learners to distinguish it from others.

-Listen and organize. Learners listen to an appropriate text, they, then, state the meaning of

certain vocabulary items. The form of items whether singular or plural, count or non-count or tenses of verbs whether present, past…etc.

-Listen and write. The teacher provides the class with dialogue, a story or a conversation. Learners listen and answer the questions about the content.

-Listen and answer. The teacher gives oral messages or conveys some information instructions, etc. The learners answer the questions by means of which the teacher determines how much they have understood.

-Participate and be tested. The learners may participate in an oral activity

2.5 Testing Speaking

It is important to check first that allows learning is being managed in a way that allow the teacher sufficient opportunity to observe pupils' talk. The following short 'checklist' may serve as a reminder when drawing up schemes of work:

1-Will there be different kinds of talk, and will the pupils experience different roles and purposes for talk?

2- Is there a variety of groupings?

3- Is the classroom resourced and organized for talk?

4 - Is there the right amount of time for talk?

5- Are there mechanisms for recording talk?

6- Are the pupils to be involved in the overall process?

(Brindley 1995)

Learners can be given greater opportunities to orally construct their messages, such as responding to brief written messages, to listen to announcement and extract specific point of information on or to exchange information with a fellow learner (Hedge, 2000: 383). Biggs (2003: 177) explains that the ability to speak is tested through an overall impression in most cases. This way seems more practical as the teacher need not designate a special day or time for oral fluency exams. By observing learner's interaction and participation in class, he can judge their oral ability. However the following testing techniques might be of some help in this regard.

-Learner's participation in a dialogue, a debate, a classroom conversation, etc.

-Learner's narration, telling jokes, recounting events, giving instructions talking about familiar topic, etc. for a limited period of time.

-Learner's engagement in a formal talks or speeches such as class reports, panels, arguments, etc.

-Learners may be asked questions of general interests to which they answer in two or more sentences.

-Learners may interviewed by the teacher who asks Wh-

questions about topic and situations the learners have been dealing with. However, one can point out very briefly the role played by the teacher in order enhance speed production of learners.

2.7 Testing Reading

Reading is an essential skill for college students not only as a source of obtaining information but also as an enjoyable activity. Learners of English must "learn to read" in order to "read to learn". One must read first for meaning, since the fundamental aim of language is communication. Indeed, one reads better when he understands what he reads. Since books are the chief conveyer of knowledge within the reach of many people, and many of the books we use today are written in English, it is clear that nonnative speakers of English must keep on reading in order to gain "experience". It should lead to comprehension and should be accompanied with speed. Comprehension calls for deriving meaning from the printed material and reading speed is

determined in part by the number of words our eyes can see at a single glance. Edward Fry believes that like two sides of a coin, speed and comprehension are inseparable in efficient reading. An efficient reader can not only read slowly with good comprehension, but can also read fast with needed comprehension when circumstances require. There is no single best reading speed. We read different materials at different rates of speed. The good reader adjusts his speed to the material he is reading and the kind of comprehension he desires. Regarding the speed of reading we may divide the readers into three main groups; slow readers, average readers and fast readers (Sattar 1999).

3.Test Analysis

To investigate the preparatory schools learners' ability to produce or recognize the conversation, a list of ten items is adopted. The sample of this study consists of fifty subjects.

According to Masden (1983:181-2)"a test question is considered too easy if more than ninety percent get it right". An item is considered too difficult if fewer than 30 percent get it right".

On the other hand Heaton (1988:178) notes that the difficulty or facility value of an item simply reveals how easy or difficult that a particular item proves in the test. It can be calculated by the following formula:

FV= R/N

Where:

FV stands for difficulty value.

R stands for the number of the correct answers.

N stands for the number of the students taking a test.

The result obtained after analyzing the subjects' performance in each item of the question are presented in table (1) which shows how the subjects respond to each item in the test.

It is clear that most subjects have failed to give the correct answer for the question.

3.1 Discussion of Results

The type of errors which are made by the larger number of students can be summarized as following:

1- Failure to use conversation opening in many cases.

2- Repeating the same words in more than single situation.

3- Incorrect arrangement of sentences.

3.2 Error Analysis

Johnson and Johnson (1988:110) suggest that error analysis is an approach that deals with the errors produced by the second language learner and how these errors are classified into types. Furthermore, corder (1973:290) states that error analysis is significant in three different ways firstly, the teacher will be able to know the proficiency level of his/her students. Secondly, errors provide the researcher with evidence of how language is learnt or acquired. Thirdly, committing error is a device the learner uses in order to learn. For Brown (2000;223-7) errors can be attributed to the following sources: interlingual transfer, context of learning and communication strategies.

3.2.1 Interlingual transfer

It takes place when the learner follows the rules of their mother tongue. According to Yule (2006:167) some errors may occur due to transfer which means using expressions or structures from the first language performing in the second language.

Brown(2000:224)in this respect, notes that interlingual transfer is an important source of errors

for learners. He thinks that the early stages of second language are vulnerable to interlingual transfer from the first language. In these beginning stages, before the system of the second language is familiar the first language becomes the only previous linguistic system to draw upon.

3.2.3 Context of Learning

Brown (2000:226) notes that the third main source of errors is the context of learning. This type may be attributed to the influence of certain factors such as the classroom with its teacher and materials. In other words, these errors happen as a result of a course design or teaching techniques.

3.2.4 Communication Strategies

Communication strategies are the devices which may be used by the second language learners to deal with problem or break-downs in communication. These plans enable the learners to reach the intended communicative goal even when things do not go well (Schmitt, 2002:179). Little wood (1998:83) declares that when the second language learners are engaged in communication they have communicative intension which they find difficulty in expressing because of the little knowledge they have. Accordingly, they resort to ways of overcoming the gaps between the communicative intent and the limited ability to express that intent. Avoidance is one of those strategies. It means leaving concepts with no answers. Finally, we can say that most of the subjects use conversation opening quite wrongly. This mean that they do not know how to open their conversation, consequently, they make such errors. It is expected that these errors may be attributed to classroom presentation where opening conversation is presented with insufficient explanations and practice because of the limited time given for teaching such topic. Focusing on one aspect and neglecting the other may lead to such confusion in their use.

4. Conclusions

From the empirical work of the study, it can be concluded that:

- Preparatory Schools learners face difficulty in using suitable opening for their conversation. Great number of errors made by students proves such difficulty. This validates the first hypothesis which shows that Iraqi preparatory schools learners face difficulty in their conversation.
- Analyzing the data, the study has found that the subjects face difficulty in using conversation which is shown in the total rate of their incorrect responses. Such finding verifies the second hypothesis of the current study which indicates that Iraqi preparatory schools learners' inaccurate responses may be attributed to misuse of conversation.

Appendix

Q-How do you present a suitable conversation for the following situations:

1-How do you introduce your friend Yousif to Zeki?

2-A brother of yours feels sick. What do you say to your brother when he feels sick?

3-What do you say to a friend to prevent him from going near the machine?

4-How do you start a conversation with your boss to give you a leave?

5-What do you say to someone who wants to go to the petrol station?

6-What would you say when you want to ask someone about the time?

7-How do you open your conversation when you want to invite your friend to a party?

8-How do you greet your neighbor in the evening?

9-In a restaurant, you try to offer your friend something to eat. How?

10-What do you say when you want to borrow a book from your friend?

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